

Douglass Brown

Dariush Khaleghi

Leading Others

March 15, 2024

Self Actualization and Loki

In the pantheon of modern mythology, few characters have undergone a transformation as profound and as reflective of contemporary leadership theories as Loki, the Asgardian God of Mischief. Originating from Norse mythology, Loki's journey through the tapestry of Marvel Comics and, more recently, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), presents a unique case study in leadership, personal growth, and emotional intelligence. These elements became aware to me last quarter while taking this leadership class and watching the TV show Loki on Disney+. My paper aims to explore the evolution of Loki's character, not merely as a transition from villainy to anti-heroism but as a metaphorical and visual representation of the modern leader's journey towards self-awareness, adaptability, and the integration of emotional intelligence into their leadership style.

Loki, traditionally depicted as a figure of chaos and deception in Norse legends, embodies the quintessential trickster. However, his portrayal within Marvel Comics and the MCU introduces layers of complexity and vulnerability, transforming him from a one-dimensional antagonist into a multi-faceted character grappling with issues of identity, belonging, and purpose. "Glorious Purpose" as he puts it, turns out to be much more than he realizes. Imagine being shown the moment your life ends and realizing that what you are watching is not your fate.

Central to this analysis are the concepts of emotional intelligence (EI), as popularized by psychologist Daniel Goleman and Actualized Leadership, explored by William L. Sparks. Goleman's framework, comprising self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, provides a lens through which Loki's development can be examined. While Sparks' attributes on meeting, embracing and ultimately integrating one's shadow showcases the groundwork for Loki's evolution. Each phase of Loki's journey—from his initial quest for validation as king to his eventual acceptance of his multifaceted nature—echoes the components of emotional intelligence, offering insights into how these principles manifest in leadership scenarios.

Like many leaders, Loki's path is fraught with missteps and learning opportunities, each contributing to his understanding of himself and his role within the broader narrative. Serving as a trial of internal discovery (I call them case studies), his conversations with Mobius, a member of the TVA (Time Variance Authority), further highlight the importance of empathy, relationship management, and adaptability—key components of effective leadership. He has a specific conversation with Mobius that highlights the burden of purpose and there not actually being any glory in it, but rather just choosing your burden.

Burdened with “Glorious Purpose”, Loki's journey from a would-be conqueror to a protector of the multiverse, sitting as a King of Time on a kintsugi throne, underscores the significance of self-actualization in leadership. Kintsugi is a Japanese form of repair where they use gold to fix broken clay sculptures. The gold running between the cracks adds a unique beauty to the repaired item and also enhances its value.

Drawing parallels with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Loki's evolution can be interpreted as a quest for self-fulfillment, culminating in the realization of his potential not as a ruler over free will but as a guardian of it. He spends most of his screen time in the films as a god trapped on the second tier, seeking to secure his needs for power. It is not until his adventures in the TVA and interactions with variants of himself does his perspective of need and motive shift. This shift from self-serving ambitions to a more altruistic purpose reflects a maturation process that is critical for leadership, emphasizing the need for leaders to transcend their limitations and embrace a broader vision for their influence.

Loki repeats several moments throughout his journeys in time make another attempt at the moment with deeper understanding, underscoring the idea that leadership is not a fixed trait but a continuous process of learning, growth, and adaptation. He spends centuries of time learning about his mistakes and working on self-improvement, implying that genuine leadership can emerge from a process of self-discovery, personal development, and a commitment to doing what is right, even when it is difficult.

Self-awareness, the cornerstone of EI, entails understanding one's emotions, strengths, weaknesses, and values, and their impact on others. In the context of Loki's character development, self-awareness is pivotal as he grapples with his identity, motivations, and the consequences of his actions. His lack of self-awareness leads him down a path of deceit and manipulation. However, as the series progresses, Loki begins to confront the reality of his actions and their motivations, particularly through his interactions with the Time Variance Authority (TVA) and the alternate versions of himself

he encounters. He has a poignant conversation with an older version of himself that changes his thoughts on how to proceed. This interaction with his 'variants' forces Loki to acknowledge his flaws and recognize his potential for change, illustrating Goleman's assertion that self-awareness is pivotal for personal development (Goleman, 1995). He begins to form a new self-acceptance of his place in the universe, an attribute core to Sparks' research on how actualized leaders feel (Sparks, 2019).

Self-regulation, another critical component of EI, involves managing one's emotions and impulses. For Loki, self-regulation is a struggle; his impulsivity and penchant for mischief often undermine his goals and relationships. Initially, his impulses often dictate his actions, leading to chaos and conflict. However, as Loki grows, he learns to pause, reflect, and choose his actions more carefully, demonstrating an increased capacity for self-regulation. This growth is particularly evident in his decisions to form alliances and work towards common goals, even when it means setting aside his own desires for power or revenge. His conversations with Sylvie reflect his growth in seeing how his desire for chaos is not always a suitable solution to the problem. It's a poignant moment that showcases Self-Love and Self-Acceptance, key attributes in the development of the Actualized Leader (Sparks, 2019).

Motivation, in Goleman's EI framework, is characterized by a leader's drive to achieve for the sake of achievement itself. Loki's intrinsic motivation evolves significantly over time. Initially driven by external validation and the throne, he gradually shifts towards more internally driven goals. Loki's journey through various timelines and realities create a shift in his motivation towards understanding his place in the universe and ultimately striving to maintain the balance of time itself. This transformation reflects

Goleman's concept of motivation, particularly the shift from being motivated by external rewards to finding satisfaction in the pursuit of inherently rewarding goals (Goleman, 1995). This shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation underscores Goleman's perspective on the importance of leaders being driven by internal values rather than external rewards (Goleman, 1995).

Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, is perhaps where Loki demonstrates the most growth. Early on, his actions seem devoid of any genuine empathy. His initial interactions are marked by manipulation and a lack of genuine concern for others. However, as he encounters various versions of himself and forms unlikely alliances, Loki begins to exhibit a deeper capacity for empathy. Through his experiences, especially those involving Sylvie, he starts to understand and even share the feelings of those around him, leading to more meaningful connections and a departure from his previously self-centered perspective. This development aligns with Goleman's views on empathy as a critical element of EI, facilitating better communication and relationship-building (Goleman, 1998).

Lastly, Social Skills, the final component of Goleman's EI model, involve managing relationships to move people in the desired direction and navigate social networks effectively. Loki's adeptness at manipulation initially suggests a perverse form of social skill. However, as his skills improve, he transitions from a solitary figure into a leader and collaborator. As his character matures, these skills are redirected towards more noble ends. His ability to inspire, persuade, and work with others illustrates the importance of social skills in achieving common goals. Goleman posits that social skills are

essential for leadership and conflict management, enabling individuals to build rapport and guide groups effectively (Goleman, 1998).

Loki's transformation from a villainous trickster to a character of depth and complexity mirrors the journey of developing emotional intelligence. His journeys across time, interactions with the various versions of himself, and completion of the challenges set in front of him highlight the various sequences of self-actualization one must navigate. His evolution provides a compelling narrative on the power of EI in leadership, illustrating how self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills are not static traits but areas for continuous growth and development.

In conclusion, Goleman's work on emotional intelligence offers a valuable lens through which to view leadership and character development. Viewing a show like Loki on Disney+ and studying this work along his character arc serves as a metaphorical exploration of the challenges and rewards of personal growth and emotional maturity in leadership. Loki's character evolution through the MCU can be seen as a journey through the development of emotional intelligence and self actualization. From self-awareness to social skills, his story reflects the challenges and growth that come with embracing and improving each component of an Actualized Leader. As Goleman and Sparks suggest, these elements are crucial for personal development and effective leadership. Loki's transformation, therefore, not only entertains but also provides valuable insights into the power of emotional intelligence in shaping one's destiny. If you could only take away one thing from, this show and my paper, let it be that you are in control of every moment and the best moment you can create is one that is focused, aware, thoughtful and confident.

References:

Goleman, D. (1995). Emotional intelligence. Bantam Books.

Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2002). Primal leadership: Learning to lead with emotional intelligence. Harvard Business School Press.

Goleman, D. (1998). Working with emotional intelligence. Bantam Books.

Sparks, W. (2019). Actualized Leadership. PB Printing